

KEY AREA #5

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

1. Equal Opportunity is based on the premise that soldiers have a right to excel unhindered by prejudice due to race, color, creed, gender, ethnic group, religion, or national origins. It is the institutional embodiment of the old NCO saying: "The only color I see standing in this formation is Army Green."
2. There is an entire system dedicated to promotion of Equal Opportunity in the Army, a system whose resources may be tapped for training support. This area further educates soldiers about racial, ethnic, and religious groups, which differ from their own and about the effects of their own actions, attitudes, and words upon soldiers of these differing groups.
3. This area is related to all other areas except Safety, but most particularly to Team Building, Quality Individual Leadership, and Gender Issues.

Historical example and case study:

AFRICAN-AMERICAN VOLUNTEER INFANTRY REPLACEMENTS

African-Americans have fought in every war in which this country has been engaged. Their heritage in the U.S. Army bespeaks of dedication and heroism as members of the U.S. Colored Infantry in the Civil War, as Buffalo Soldiers of the 9th and 10th Cavalry Regiments and the 24th and 25th Infantry Regiments on the frontier, and as members of the 92nd and 93rd Infantry Divisions in World War I. The 92nd and 93rd Divisions fought again in World War II, the former in Italy and the latter in the Pacific. African-American soldiers, however, were organized in racially segregated units. The use of African-American soldiers in World War II as infantry replacements in all-white divisions in Europe radically departed from traditional Army policy.

In December 1944, shortages of individual infantry rifle replacements in the European Theater mounted sharply. A deficiency of more than 23,000 riflemen threatened to curtail American plans to press the attack against Germany. White soldiers from service units and unseasoned recruits fresh from basic training were being assigned to Army infantry divisions in Europe but were insufficient to erase the deficit. In a break with Army policy that had provided for racially segregated units, African-American members of rear-area support units were asked to volunteer as private and private first class to serve as infantrymen in otherwise white units where their assistance was most needed. (There were no African-American infantry units in the European Theater.)

Army leaders in Europe had mixed feelings about this plan. Some foresaw “very grave difficulties.” More pragmatic officials, among them General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Commander of Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Forces, and Brigadier General Benjamin O. Davis, then Special Advisor and Coordinator to the Theater Commander on Negro Troops and the Army’s first African-American General Officer, thought otherwise. After much debate, Eisenhower directed that the African-American volunteers not be integrated individually but were to be organized and trained as infantry rifle platoons.

By February 1945, more than 4,500 African-Americans, many of them truck drivers, longshoremen, and cargo checkers, had volunteered for retraining as infantrymen. Noncommissioned officers who volunteered took a reduction in rank to serve in combat. Nearly fifty platoons were trained and in March were assigned to divisions in the 12th Army and 6th Army Groups. In the 12th Army Group the platoons were assigned to divisions in groups of three, with each division then distributing one platoon to each regiment. The regiments, in turn, selected a company to which the unit went as a fourth rifle platoon and provided platoon leaders and sergeants.

For the divisions poised for the Rhine River crossing, the new platoons were welcome reinforcements. For their part, the African-American platoons were quick to identify themselves with their parent divisions. Each platoon was closely watched and its combat record evaluated. In general, the divisions had only praise for the African-American platoons. The 104th Infantry Division considered their combat record “outstanding” and the caliber of men “equals to any veteran platoon.” The commander of the 78th Infantry Division, whose African-American platoons joined the division at the Remagen bridgehead, wished that “he could obtain more of the Negro riflemen.” The men of the 1st Infantry Division like to fight beside the African-Americans because of their aggressiveness. Without consideration of race or skin color, the African-American platoons fought as members of team, supporting elements of their company on the offense and rescuing besieged and wounded members of the battalion at formidable risks to their own safety. African-Americans acted as platoon leaders when white leaders fell in combat. On such occasions, no African-American platoon faltered in accomplishing its mission.

One battalion commander concluded that: in courage, coolness, dependability, and pride, they are on a par with any white troops I have ever had occasion to work with . . . White men and colored men are welded together with a deep friendship and respect born in combat and matured by realization that such an association is not the impossibility that many of us have been led to believe.

The experimental platoons were disbanded during demobilization after World War II. Except in the 6th Army Group where the platoons were misused by combining them to form armored infantry companies, the experiment was highly successful. African-Americans had always looked to the Army as an avenue of opportunity—for training, education, and advancement—when they were turned away by other segments of American society. The experimental platoons had opened the door of opportunity even further. But more important the African-American infantry platoons demonstrated that opportunity could be expanded with equality, rather than on a segregated basis.

This area is directly supported by the following suggested lesson plans contained in this publication:

- Prevention of Sexual Harassment
- Extremism & Extremist Organizations
- EO Complaint Procedures
- Racism & Sexism
- Diversity Training
- Religious Accommodation
- Values, Attitudes, Behaviors, & Self-Awareness
- Communications Process
- Group Development
- Conflict Management
- Professional Ethics

